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THE WAGNERIAN CULTURE SYNTHESIS

By WILHELM PETERSON-BERGER¹

A PROMINENT historian and Wagner critic, H. S. Chamberlain, in his great work "The Foundations of the 19th Century," makes a distinction between the words culture and civilization. The former word he applies to spiritual development, the latter to material, a distinction which seems to be more and more generally accepted. At the same time, he includes under the term culture the three spheres of religion, science, and art.

If one accepts this distinction and division, then the evolution of culture must be looked upon, not merely as a parallel movement within each and every one of its three spheres, but rather as a reciprocal action, and above all as coöperative. For it is clearly evident, that not one of these three spheres, isolated from the others, could satisfactorily carry out the idea of culture.

This, then, is the essence of synthetic art. And as, in consequence, all direct cultural development is manifested chiefly in a struggle for completeness and unity, so the climax and rhythm of the movement are marked by more or less comprehensive syntheses.

Without attempting to set forth in detail the general laws by which culture syntheses come into being, we shall now try to find out by what right one may call the artistic result of Richard Wagner's life-work a culture synthesis.

It is peculiar to the idea and nature of art, that the innermost being of an art work must always be presented in such a way as to act upon the sense of comprehension. This action, as we know, does not need to be direct. It depends upon the inclination, education, susceptibility, disposition, freedom of form or subjection to preconceived notions, and other qualities of the person, whether he must look or listen once or many times, before he apprehends the spirit of the work. But when he does apprehend, it is not his intelligence, his knowledge, or his will, but it is his sensibility that is first touched and made to vibrate, and which, at this touch, instinctively comprehends the essence of the work.

Therefore it would be of great value to our investigation, and would give us a suitable starting-point, if we could, in a general

¹Translated from the author's "Richard Wagner som Kultur-företeelse." (Chapter IV: Den Wagnerska Kultursyntesen.)

way, determine the conditions under which a sufficiently interested and educated, but at the same time sufficiently unprepared and fairly unprejudiced listener, receives his first really conscious and intelligent impression of a Wagner drama.

There are many Wagner admirers to be found to bear witness with regard to their experience in this respect, but before appealing to them, I shall cite a case which falls within my own field of observation.

This case dates back to some twenty years or so ago. It concerns a gifted and intelligent man who, born of the peasant class and brought up in a thinly populated district, found opportunity only when of mature age to follow his natural bent and devote himself to study. Of course, he wanted to be a preacher. His turn of mind, as well as the devout spirit of the educated people with whom he had hitherto come in contact, scarcely recognized any other course of study as honorable. For the theatrical art, of which he knew nothing, he cherished a horror which had been instilled into him, and was possessed with the preconceived notion that its influence was something injurious, if not dangerous, for the spiritual welfare of mankind.

But he was musically inclined, and was attracted to the art of sound. Of worldly music he knew little, but so much the more of liturgical and church music. His knowledge embraced the field of oratorio, and he admired both Bach and Händel, and Mendelssohn as well.

During his course of study, this man came out into the world somewhat, and coming in contact with other music lovers, he often heard Wagner's name mentioned, and his art discussed in such a way as to arouse his curiosity. Obtaining a closer knowledge of this artist's life and work, he found to his great surprise that there was and had been for a long time a controversy as to the legitimacy and truth of his work in both art and theory. It was something strikingly new to him, and difficult to understand, that art could be a subject of controversy. And his surprise was not diminished by the discovery that in some respects this controversy resembled the spiritual conflicts and passionate outbursts connected with the many external difficulties and inner ruptures and crises of the early Christian church. His historical training put him in a position to see the resemblance between the Wagner movement and a missionary or religious excitement.

Indeed, it is scarcely necessary to add that his curiosity was only increased by this discovery, and that at the earliest opportunity he broke his resolution not to attend the theatre. When a

Wagner evening was announced at the opera house, he promptly bought a ticket for the performance which was, as it happened, "Tannhäuser."

Before discussing the effect which this drama had upon him, let us consider for a moment if the case is sufficiently typical to be of value as evidence.

The man was, without doubt, in the matter of esthetic preparation, a truly ideal Wagner listener. He knew none of the "aims" of art, and was pledged to no party. But he possessed an ideal temperament and a certain simple, general culture. He understood serious music, and had by virtue of his calling acquired some experience in interpreting the words, both of song and recitative. To be sure, he was governed by an ethical prejudice against all scenic art; but, as we shall see, this does not lessen the general significance of the case, but, on the contrary, strengthens it. Therefore, we may accept this listener as reasonably typical for our purpose.

Meanwhile, it remains for us to determine whether or not "Tannhäuser" was the most suitable drama for presenting the Wagnerian art to such a completely uninitiated, though otherwise suitable listener. The question is not difficult to answer, if we remember that the erotic life problem, which in varied forms and acts constitutes the foundation of reality and experience in all of Wagner's dramas, here in "Tannhäuser" takes on its most universally intelligible and, for the majority of people, the most easily recognized form; and that this work, for this and other reasons, occupies a strikingly central position among Wagner's productions. We may say therefore with certainty, that the choice of dramas which chance made for our curious Wagner novice was the best that could have been made.

It is hardly probable that the presentation was a model one. Nevertheless, the impression received by the listener was to him entirely unexpected—new, rich, deep, and thrilling. Afterward, he summed up the details and expressed the key-note in a single word: *worship*. All the factors in the work, the life problem, the action, music, characters all fused into something with which he was familiar in the calling he had chosen—a public religious exercise, the observance of a cult.

It can not be denied that this characterization is striking. The ordinary irreverent opera-goer perceives, indeed, the seriousness of the Tannhäuser drama, and its close connection with Christian religious views, yet always, as it were, through the veil of worldly amusement. This unpractised listener, with his prejudice against

all forms of theatrical art, discovered at the first glance the strongest, deepest, and most distinguishing characteristic of the Wagner art, its serious religious note.

Indeed, it must be admitted that this is especially conspicuous in "Tannhäuser," with its many distinctly religious ideas, motifs, and situations, as sin, repentance, prayer, pardon, condemnation, holy pilgrims, Madonna pictures. But this has a specifically Catholic stamp—and the listener was an orthodox Lutheran—and we all know how easily, in an ordinary uninspired opera presentation, one's attention is turned away from the essential and directed toward distracting details, such as new singers, costumes, theatre parties, decorations, or scenic arrangement. All these and similar details are what the superficial, habitual theatre-goer first notices. Therefore, when this man, totally inexperienced as he was in this line, first of all perceived something else, it was due entirely to the fact that his being was attuned to the key-note of the work, so that he instantly vibrated in unison with the ringing force which welled up through his consciousness, in spite of a host of bewildering and half understood details.

Numberless listeners, among them both greater and lesser critics—Wolzogen, Glasenapp, Schuré, Chamberlain, and others—have been affected in a similar way, in particular by "Tannhäuser." One can, in fact, read this more or less clearly in their enunciations and analyses; and yet, most of them have been so bound by their esthetic and musical theories that the question which lay so near at hand, as to whether this religious spirit might not possibly be common to all of Wagner's productions, has never once occurred to them.

Yet such is the case. Let us imagine that a person such as I have just described, introduced to Wagner in the same way, is impelled by his first strong impression to investigate Wagner's other works. This very reasonable assumption will prove to be particularly significant in its results. We shall find support for our view that all of Wagner's art is fundamentally a manifestation of religious sentiment, and at the same time we shall get a picture of the culture synthesis which we suggested in the beginning.

After such an initiation, the next work which a yearning Wagner novice gets to know, presumably is "Lohengrin," which follows "Tannhäuser" chronologically. That this work likewise strengthens and confirms the previously acquired impression of religious sentiment, every one who has any conception of its purport feels. The entire drama is a brilliantly symbolic presentation of the highest doctrines of theoretical Christianity, above

all, the doctrine of faith and its significance in the struggle between the powers of light and darkness.

Following "Lohengrin," it is probable that our novice comes to "The Flying Dutchman" which, together with the two previously mentioned belongs to the group of Wagner's most often presented works, all of them being of a popular religious nature. Here in the "Dutchman" he finds again the well-known theme taken from the Christian and other religions, that of sacrifice and redemption, used as the chief dramatic motif.

But at the same time he learns that this theme, on the one hand incarnated in the ghostly romanticism of the Dutchman tradition, and on the other appearing in a *milieu* of idyllic-realistic commonplaceness, is made up of such scattered and destructive elements that the religious note does not always sound forth clearly, although there is plainly an effort in that direction throughout the work. If our Wagner friend remembers that the "Dutchman" is the first real achievement of the music dramatist in this field, he will find the effort still more interesting, and will see in it a confirmation of his first Tannhäuser impression.

We can now imagine that his interest and enthusiasm have increased until, along with his cultivation of the Wagnerian dramas, he begins the study of their mythical, literary, and folklore sources, the Celto-Germanic and early Scandinavian sagas, as well as Wagner's own theories of art and critical writings, his life and spiritual development. Therewith two significant discoveries await him. First, he will learn that Wagner himself, in his brochure on "Religion and Art," states that these two manifestations of the human soul-life are intimately related and mutually dependent one upon the other. Second, he will find that among the dramas of which Wagner completed the literary part alone and never composed the music, one treats of Volund the Smith, a confessedly erotico-artistic life problem, while in another, "Jesus of Nazareth," Wagner does not hesitate to present dramatically the most religious of all figures in the history of humanity. In general, he will learn that the great founders of religion, among them Buddha, kept Wagner's imagination busy in a characteristic way.

Thus prepared, he goes to see the five dramas next in order after "Lohengrin": the four parts of "The Ring of the Nibelung," and "Tristan and Isolde."

His expectation of perceiving here a religious undertone of the same sort as that in the preceding works, is disappointed when he learns that all these works taken together form a single group

among Wagner's productions, a group which may be designated as the "philosophical." However, that insight into the nature of philosophy which we may assume with him, makes it possible for him to discover, differentiated somewhat from this philosophy, an atmosphere of deep and passionately pulsating religious sentiment. Further, he finds that the purely philosophical element, not only where it steps naked into the light, but even more perhaps where the artist succeeds in blending and fusing it with the whole, impresses upon the work a peculiar stamp of universality, of something which goes beyond the usual boundaries of art. And it is this universality which, without direct religious action, nevertheless elevates and sustains the work within the realm of the religious mood, and calls forth corresponding admiration.

Certain it is, that in a closer study of the separate Nibelung dramas, he will encounter unexplainable contradictions in the action, and dull passages in both words and music. But besides this, nevertheless, in such fundamental scenes as that of the death augury in "The Valkyr," the awakening of Brünnhilde in "Siegfried," and the death march in "The Twilight of the Gods," he will find that underneath it all the stream of religious feeling runs unbroken, watering with its flood the roots of this Yggdrasil of music dramatics, "The Ring of the Nibelung." This powerful composition, he perceives, is built up on religious myths and symbols, treating not only of the beginning of the world, but of the end, and of its redemption from suffering through love.

By this time, therefore, a fairly complete familiarity with this great work, and the study of its fundamental spiritual note, are calculated to awaken within the mind of our investigator a conception of the entire subject of synthesis in art, and at the same time to develop more acutely his comprehension of the religious element in Wagner's art. He comes now to understand that the religion which is professed and enunciated in and through this art, is endlessly far above the stiff, scholastic formulas of the usual dogmas, and is in itself the quintessence of the so-called creed of common life, by virtue of its high spirituality a confessionless, and—further—a nameless religion.

The study of "Tristan" will not disturb this view. The philosophy of this work is that of Schopenhauer, and its acknowledged pessimism is related both to Buddhism and Christianity. Likewise, the part which the "world" plays in its complex of ideas, reminds one strongly of the position which it occupies in the scheme of Christianity. But more than all these external forms, must the unparalleled passionate strength of feeling expressed in

the Tristan drama lead the thought into the sphere of religion where alone, up to this time, was such ecstasy known—ecstasy which in itself is of a religious nature, and which, in its fiery glow, melts and transforms into luminous emblems and metaphysical symbols all within its circle. And all this in “Tristan” is even more incapable of being formulated, still more inexpressible and spiritual, than in the Nibelung dramas.

If our Wagner friend is the least bit sharp-sighted psychologically—and in this respect he ought to have developed by this time—then this study of “Tristan” will surely remind him of a point so often demonstrated by psychological investigation, the relation between *eroticism* and *religion*. And it is this relation which Wagner brings out so clearly in his art. Yes, one may venture the assertion that Wagner’s dramas are as strongly pervaded with a religious fervor or ecstasy, as the life problems are manifestly erotic. This is one of the conclusions to which a study of Wagner leads.

Our coming expert has now progressed so far on his way of initiation that there remain only two dramas, the latest and perhaps the most wonderful of all: “The Meistersingers of Nuremberg,” and “Parsifal.” We may imagine that in order to familiarize himself with these, he sets out for the festival at Bayreuth, where “The Meistersingers” likewise ought preferably to be seen and heard in its national setting. Not one of Wagner’s works is better suited to that stage than this happy, sunshiny comedy with its mild, conciliatory philosophy of life, its humor and its triumphant music, giving as a whole a lightly sketched but fairly historical picture of German temperament, German feeling and culture. No work can ever illustrate more clearly or more brilliantly than this, the national thought and cultural significance of Bayreuth, in its character of the logical and real conclusion of the Wagnerian art production.

It is not difficult to find the religious element in this work. It is wholly and completely embodied in the figure of Hans Sachs on the one hand in a more general way, in his piety, his understanding and fine resignation in the presence of youth, yes, even in his humor. On the other hand, it is to be seen in his specifically Wagnerian conception of art, which naturally is Wagner’s own. This pervades and controls a principal and integral part of the action of the drama, but is summarized in a highly characteristic manner in Sachs’ concluding speech by the words “the sacred German art.” His entire view is expressed in that one word “sacred.”

With Wagner art was a religion, the most generally accepted expression for his religious feeling—therefore, it was “sacred.” It never occurred to him in any of his many theoretical works to discuss the *raison d’être* of art. So free as he was from every trace of skepticism or agnosticism, it was impossible for him even to question this view of art, and he had but little idea of its biological significance. Art had for him an absolute value. The word to him meant origin: in the beginning there was art. Viewed from this standpoint, the personally religious element in the philosophical dramas of “The Nibelung’s Ring” and “Tristan” stands out still more conspicuously.

But the art that Wagner meant was not a superficial, plebeian embellishment and decoration of the commonplaceness of everyday life; it was brought about by the coöperation of all the separate arts. It was a lifting up of the soul to the spiritualized heights of religion, to the pure realm of deep, though radiantly happy seriousness, to a plane the most immaterial possible in this material world, a plane which presented a picture or interpretation of life so drenched with the tears of pain and joy, so steeped in the silent and eternal sunshine of truth, that in its presence all other pictures or interpretations dissolved and melted away into nothingness.

All this he attained—after years of struggle and effort, and even mistakes—in clearest and most consummate form in “Parsifal,” that beautiful work of his old age. With this “*Bühnenweihfestspiel*” (that is, festival play, intended to consecrate, to sanctify the theatre) he sets the final official seal of religious feeling on his entire life-work, and gives us the key to the inmost secret of his being: *he was an artistic reformer and promulgator of religion.*¹

But with the experience of “Parsifal,” and with the discovery of its relation to the personality of its originator, our Wagner investigator has concluded his initiation, and he now emerges a full-fledged expert. The magic circle of the great dramas closes about him in a symbolization of the highest religious sentiment. Here in “Parsifal” he receives once more his first impression, though endlessly widened, deepened, and clarified. Here he finds again not only the Tannhäuser struggle between elemental eroticism and religio-esthetic romanticism, but also the radiant faith symbolism of “Lohengrin,” the redemption theme of “The Flying Dutchman” and “The Ring,” the noble gentleness of “The Meistersingers,” together with the light and joy of its midsummer mood

¹That Wagner, in his treatise on “Religion and Art,” denies every intention of founding a new religion, is naturally no evidence against the correctness of this statement, since it is a question of what he did, and not of what he thought he was doing.

here subdued to the Good Friday spirit, and finally, even the intense fervor and passion of the "Tristan" music, now purified of all wordly desire or earthly dross. "Parsifal" is the essence and sum total of the entire Wagner dramatic art, the synthesis of synthesis.

If now we try to get a survey of the store of knowledge which our Wagner expert, during his analytical investigation, has accumulated in his memory and in his library, we shall find that it comprises all the essential results gleamed from Germany's spiritual evolution up to the middle of the nineteenth century, and that it gives a very complete picture of the cultural and religious history of the German people, its literary, dramatic, and musical development, its philosophical productivity, its legendary treasure, its race kinships and origin.

On this basis, it becomes clear that Wagner's artistic life work may be truthfully designated as a culture synthesis. And this becomes still more evident if we now follow up the association of ideals which all our previous reasoning logically requires, and thus disclose the connection between the religious key-note of the Wagner art, and its manifest character of a musical culture syntheses.

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When Chamberlain, the author mentioned in our introduction, undertook his division of culture into three spheres, it is not impossible that he may have had in mind one of Goethe's most remarkable aphorisms: He who has art and science, has likewise religion; he who has neither of the first two, may have religion.

So runs the great poet's enunciation, remarkable for the reason that it expresses so clearly the well-known, intensely universal and synthetic nature of his genius. He obviously formulated his thought with intent, to the effect that religion may take on two entirely different aspects or forms of evolution, and must not be looked upon merely as a point of departure or hypothesis, but also as the final conclusion and quintessence of development of science and art. It is clear that to him, as well as to many other spiritually great minds such as Beethoven or Wagner, that the word religion did not mean any definite dogma or fixed creed. Such things, indeed, merely signified an incidental, though perhaps at times long extended mediary period in the evolution of religion from simple materialism to the highest form of conscious idealism. No, Goethe's religion, like that of many others before

and since, undoubtedly may be described as the positive attitude taken by the willing, feeling, and knowing—perhaps still more, the unknowing—human being, toward the mysteries of reality and infinity, those mysteries which can never be explained logically, that is, as to cause.

And this attitude, which is revealed in the lower stages of development in unconscious myths, and in conscious symbols in the higher stages, is but the expression in its most generally accepted form, of the passionate seriousness of life, and the struggle of the inner being to attain, by way of the highest truths and deepest facts, that completeness which alone constitutes the true value of all genuine religious feeling.

But culture as a biological phenomenon is, as we recall, the highest manifestation and application of a surplus of life energy accumulated in a being capable of development, during centuries of struggle with environment, and liberated only when, in some way, a diminution is brought about in the pressure of the external hardships of life. This surplus—which also may be called a sort of superqualification of pure animal existence, and which therefore distinguishes the primitive people capable of development from those incapable—is the force which has impelled the religion of the past to lift itself from the simple, materialistic stage of nature common to all, up to the plane of highest spirituality and idealism. Such an evolution of necessity emerges sooner or later as a culture synthesis.

But if we try to imagine the different phases of this development, we must first and foremost admit that Goethe was right when he conceived religion as the hypothesis and first source of science and art. Out of the myths, the emotionalism, the doctrines and theories of the original materialistic religion, gradually evolves a desire for truth, for investigation and knowledge. In the same way comes the evolution of art from the practical side of religion, from the forms of primitive worship, in especial from the ceremonial use of rhythm as a means of exciting emotion, as well as from externals such as amulets, symbols, images, or temples.

Science soon splits into many branches and groups, consciously frees itself from religion, and often attacks and opposes her forms of revelation. Likewise, art divides into a number of individual forms, all more or less separate from religion, and endeavoring still further to develop independently of one another.

Meanwhile, unnoticed and without ceasing, the surplus life energy is driving the sap of religion up through both of these shoots from her stem, thus nourishing the process of development.

And during the course of this upward movement, religion herself is developed, purified and transformed, like a gas that is filtered and rarefied. When the individual sciences approach the zenith of their special line of development, *she* is the secret force which enables them once more to come together in a synthesis.

The sciences unite to form a comprehensive, universal science, philosophy; and the separate arts in the same way bring forth universal art, expressed in the music drama. But when this happens, religion herself also reaches her highest point of refinement and becomes, so to speak, a universal religion, the quintessence of all typically human religious experience and feeling. But as such, she is too immaterial, too incomprehensible, too unassertive, to possess body or form of her own, so she borrows one from art, and takes, very naturally, the form of the most ethereal and most ideal of all, the art of music.

Music has on its part, during the period of isolation, developed to the highest point of spiritual worth and power. Thus, through Bach and Beethoven it has been expanded and refined until it forms the strongest expression of the tragic-humorous conception of life, and as such becomes the body for the spirit of purified religion. Religion becomes music, and music, religion. And in this form of manifestation, she unites with the two lesser syntheses of universal science and universal art. They are absorbed in her, and the last combination takes place and produces the culture synthesis, the symbol of music-religion, the true music drama.

As we have seen, Wagner's art corresponds fairly well to this theory and characterization of the origin of the music drama. But naturally, Wagner's culture synthesis is not the only one possible or conceivable in our day, from the fact that it has, along with the typical, too many individual or incidental features. Such individual features, as we have previously pointed out, are the rôle which eroticism plays in all of the Wagner productions, and the opposition of this eroticism to religion. This opposition has its analogy and secondary manifestation in the contradictory relations between love of the world and love of art, which may be seen in Wagner's attitude toward music as an individual art.

On the other hand, the more or less fundamental religious atmosphere is a necessarily typical feature. For whatever the musical culture synthesis which Europe and humanity may yet bring forth, certain it is, they must have the same *roots* as Wagner's art. The fibers of life must run back to that first wonderful culture synthesis, the Greek music drama, which, originating in

a form of worship, the Dionysos cult, continued to be a religious service up to the time of its highest development.

This music drama, whose greatest creators, Aeschylos and Sophocles, were deeply imbued with the esoteric and mystic religious spirit of their time, this drama, whose mission was religious purification through instinctive sympathy and awe, began to decline the very moment that religion passed away. It was then that the art of the music drama lost its soul and became an ordinary "public entertainment."

We now know that this decline resulted in complete withering of branch and stem. Life withdrew to the roots, and all efforts at revival continued artificial and fruitless until, after the lapse of centuries, the spirit of tragedy again entered into the drama, when a genius was born, humanly strong enough and richly endowed to embody in his art the most synthetic of all elements, religion.

For the religion which Wagner so passionately proclaimed—which only as music drama *can* be proclaimed—is tragedy itself, the essence of the culture synthesis, which we have seen evolve from a tragic-humorous conception of life, through centuries of struggle and changes of time, among the highly gifted races of northern Europe.

(Translated by Hester Coddington)